

Date: March 14, 2021 (Lent 4)

1. Texts: Numbers 21:4-9; Ps. 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21.
2. Subject: evangelism.
3. Topic: contextual evangelism.
4. Aim: provide a framework and a model.
5. Proposition: "We have to say what God means in ways that others can accept."

THEY HEAR WHAT WE SAY

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."¹ However true this is for us inside the Church, it has no meaning for those outside the Church. Think about this with me.

Most of our friends and neighbours—heck, most of our own family members—don't actually think they need to be saved. Sure, they're not perfect, but they consider themselves no worse than anyone else and a whole lot better than terrorists, child molesters and politicians. The vast majority of people, especially in North America and Europe, are thinking they are basically ok. What do they need to be saved from?

Following this is a second thought: if there is a God in heaven, then they've done enough good things to be allowed in to that heaven. They give to charities. They help other people. They don't beat their spouses. Basically, they're good enough, so why worry? If there is a God in heaven, it's those other bad people who should worry.

The fact of this two-pronged attitude leaves you and me with a big problem. "For by grace you have been saved by faith" is one of the foundational statements and promises of Christianity. And, no matter how many times we recite this verse, the people listening to us will not likely hear it, let alone accept its truth.

And, even if they do hear the words, their spirits are likely to be closed to the truth because of the Church's history of judgment and condemnation. Our listeners will assume that we verse-quoters are only quoting this verse to prove how bad they are and how good we are.

¹ Ephesians 2:8.

This is the dilemma of our proclamation. The people around us don't share our understandings. Their perception of the Church also stands in the way. It is as if we are shouting the gospel at them in German: they don't understand the words and the words sound terrifying. That's the dilemma of Christian evangelism.

But if you and I are to make sense out of the gospel for other people, we have to use language and ideas which those other people can accept. We have to speak their language, not our own. We have to put the gospel in their framework and not impose our own. We meet them on their terms, not on ours.

Let's start with our own experience and understanding. When we begin to talk to others about our experience of salvation, we start with the word, "I".

- "I found..."
- "I experienced..."
- "I came to understand..."

We're not imposing our understanding on them. We're only describing our own experience. We're not trying to convince them of anything. We're only describing our own history.

Of course, such a conversation will depend on our experience of being saved by grace through faith.

"Being saved" does not mean we are evil. "Being saved" is not a statement about how bad we are. It is a statement about how gracious and good God is. Think of it like this.

Left on our own, we don't automatically find God. We don't naturally do what God wants us to do. We don't instinctively reflect God in what we do and say. In order to find God, in order to do what God wants us to do, in order for us to more accurately reflect the image of God, God has to do the work. That's what the quote means, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." We don't find God—he finds us. We don't

do good—God works good through us. We aren't mirrors for God on our own—he has to show himself to and through us.

To be saved is to be found by God.

It is as we turn to God in faith that he makes himself real in and through us.

Faith is a relationship with God. Faith is not the same as saying, "Oh, sure, I believe in God" in the same way as you might say, "Oh, sure, I believe in telling the truth and being nice to other people." That's not faith.

Faith is a meaningful and life-changing relationship with God. Faith changes who we are and how we act. Faith is a fundamental and active relationship with God.

And not just with any old God. Faith is a living and life-giving relationship with God as he is revealed in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. The relationship that motivates and guides us is a relationship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Or, if you prefer, with God the Creator, God the Saviour and God the Spirit-Guide.

This faith relationship is marked by love, trust, self-sacrifice and surrender to the will of God. The faithful disciple of Christ loves God as he is and trusts God to be God in and through his life. The disciple sacrifices his own will for the will of God and seeks to follow what God desires. The pillars of our faith relationship are love, trust, self-sacrifice and surrender.

It is through this faith that God reaches into our lives. We don't earn his action. We don't achieve our own salvation. We don't deserve any such notice by God. By his free choice we are saved through our faith. By God's grace we have been saved through faith.

That's what we have to make clear to others, but inside their own context. Which is why we begin with the word, "I". We never—and I mean, never—say, "You should go to Church." "You should read the Bible." "You need to get right

with God." And the worst one of all, "If you were to die tonight, do you know where you will spend eternity?" We start with "I": "I found some fulfillment when I turned to God." "I am more at peace with myself since I developed faith." "I know I was raised in the Church, but life changed when I took it seriously."

It is through such conversations that we begin to build a shared vocabulary that can lead to understanding.

Once we've laid enough of a foundation of trust, we can then say, "Does any of this make sense to you? Does it sound like I'm out of my mind?" We develop a conversation around the role of God in everyday living.

At some point in the conversations, it may become appropriate to say, "Would you like to come to church with me? I can pick you up." Or you might ask, "Would you like to talk to someone else about all this?"

We start with our own experience of faith to open the discussion about the other person's experience. We share who we are, in the hope that they might experience fulfillment in Christ. We have been saved by grace through faith and we share that experience with others in ways that invite them to inquire.

This is genuine evangelism. This is proclamation. As you can tell, it has nothing to do with guilt, shame or blame. It is not about being bad—or good, for that matter. Evangelism is all about sharing our experience in ways that other people can appreciate. We build up our relationship around our experience with God. This can enable the other person to explore his or her own salvation.

We Christians are designed for this purpose. We fulfill Christ's command and our re-creation through our proclamation. We are made more complete through our proclamation. So, not only by grace have we been saved, we find personal fulfillment as we share in the salvation of others. What more can anyone want?

AMEN.